THE FOURTH OF JULY
July 4, 2010

JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 30
Jeremiah 7:1–7
Acts 4:13–21, 5:27–29

"We must obey God rather than any human authority."
Acts 5:29 (NRSV)

I believe in an America . . .
that each day gives new immigrants
the same gift my parents received.
An America that lives by a constitution
that inspires freedom and
democracy around the world.
An America with a big, open,
charitable heart that reaches out
to people in need around the world.
An America that sometimes seems
confused and is always noisy.
That noise has a name;
it's called democracy.

Colin Powell
This I Believe

December 23, 1783, was a very important day in American history. On that day George Washington resigned his commission as commander of America's Continental Army. That army finally prevailed over the British forces and won independence for the thirteen colonies. Washington intended to return to civilian life. He was admired, adored, virtually worshiped by his troops and the politicians and the people. It would have been simple, the most natural thing in the world, for him to extend his authority and become the new ruler of the colonies. Indeed, most expected it. Many wanted him to do just that. Many would have made him king. Instead, Washington resigned. It was a "second shot heard around the world," says Princeton professor C. Clifton Black in an essay in *Theology Today* ("America Scriptures," vol.67, no.2, p. 127).

There is a famous painting of the scene by John Trumbull, who wrote to his brother back in London, “Washington’s resignation excites astonishment and admiration of this part of the world. ’Tis a conduct so novel, so incredible to people, who far from giving up powers they possess are willing to convulse the Empire to acquire more.”

Clearly something unique was beginning to emerge among the thirteen colonies, a new notion of limited political authority; political authority dependent not on military power, nor upon heredity and royalty, but on the consent of the people. People, the Declaration of Independence said, were endowed with unalienable rights. Unheard of.

Washington was easily the most prominent and popular individual among the newly independent colonies. After resigning his military commission, he was persuaded to run for president. He did and won and intended to serve a four-year term and return to his beloved Mount Vernon. He served a second term and again he could easily have extended his authority and the authority of his office, could easily have become a dictator. Instead, he resigned a second time in 1796 and delivered one of the most important speeches in our history, “Washington’s farewell.” Professor Black calls it, along with Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address, “American Scriptures.”

I spent a little time with it last week. It is amazingly relevant, contemporary. Washington expresses his concerns that the new republic would collapse “under the pressures of sectionalism and partisanship.” The European cure for sectionalism and partisanship, says Professor Black, was monarchy, which Washington regarded as worse than the ailment.

He warned his fellow citizens of the dangers of sectionalism, an “overgrown military establishment,” urged then to preserve “reciprocal checks in the exercise of political power.” He concluded by reiterating his major concern that citizens should “moderate the fury of party spirit and guard against the ‘impostures of a pretended patriotism.’” (How did he know about twenty-first-century talk show hosts and the Tea Party?)

By the time Washington completed his second term, we had a remarkable, new constitution, which provided, in Article VI, that “no religious test shall be required as qualification to any office or public trust.” In 1791 the Constitution was amended to further define that unique provision: Congress is forbidden from establishing a state church, using taxes to fund religious institutions, and “inhibiting the free exercise of religion.”

Northwestern emeritus Garry Wills writes, “Political freedom and religious freedom arrived together. . . . Before then it had been assumed that a national throne and a national altar must be in allegiance. The United

States rid itself of both throne and altar in one inclusive gesture." Wills observes that no other government had ever been launched without the support and collaboration of religion. This was brand new (*Head and Heart: American Christianity*, p. 2).

Clifton Black says Washington's farewell is important for what it omits to mandate: a state religion. Washington agreed with Benjamin Franklin that "every person may here worship God according to the dictates of his own heart." The states, by the way, were not there yet. Massachusetts had a reputation for executing Quakers, particularly women. State revenue supported the Puritan Church. Connecticut's constitution said government is based on the clear Word of God. Vermont extended religious freedom to Protestants. Maryland guaranteed liberty to all professing Christians.

Washington's speech was reassuring, Black says, to "uneasy Quakers, frightened Baptists, nervous Roman Catholics, fastidious Presbyterians, meddling Anglicans" (and terrified Jews). Earlier Washington had signed the Treaty of Tripoli, which was a Muslim state, that declared "the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion" and he wrote a presidential letter to a Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, assuring them of their freedom to exercise their religion and, in fact, invoking God's blessing on their endeavors.

Washington and the Founders understood the risks involved in extending and preserving freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of religion. People can worship God wherever and however they choose—or choose not to worship at all. The church is free to sink or swim on its own without government sponsorship and financial support. Citizens are free to disagree with the government, criticize the government, demonstrate publically for what they believe to be important. The result was and is a system of government that is sometimes confusing and exasperating and noisy. But the name of the noise, as Colin Powell observed, is democracy.

The Bible describes a history of contentiousness between religion and political authority and the beginnings of the impulse towards freedom. The prophets of Israel were a thorn in the side and a pain in the neck to the kings. Prophets are not easy to get along with. They complain about how things are; they criticize the establishment; they embarrass the king by standing outside the gates of the royal palace pounding on the door and demanding justice for the poor and marginalized. They are a nuisance and an embarrassment; they keep invoking God to support their position; and they frequently end up in jail. Jeremiah walks up to the gates of the temple in Jerusalem and says, "Hear the word of the Lord. Amend your ways. Stop oppressing the abused, the widowed and orphaned. Stop shedding innocent blood." It's not the kind of thing the king, government, or the high priest

wants to hear. It can get you jailed or worse in Iran, Cuba, China, Venezuela today. It lands Jeremiah in the stocks and then prison, where the king's men are urging his execution

In the readings from the Acts of the Apostles, six centuries later, two followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who was put to death for sedition and disturbing the Roman peace, are in trouble with the authorities. Peter and John have been arrested for preaching in public and stirring up trouble, are flogged and ordered to cease and desist from talking publically about Jesus. They disobey. They show up in the morning, in the same place, still talking about Jesus. Arrested again, this time for deliberate civil disobedience and ordered again to stop it, Peter says one of the most profoundly revolutionary things anybody ever said: "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

There goes any rationale for dictatorship or totalitarianism. It is why tyrants —from Roman emperors and Adolf Hitler to Josef Stalin to the Taliban— cannot abide freedom of conscience and speech and religion. It is so precious, and on the Fourth of July people of faith ought to think about it and talk about it and thank God for it.

It is fragile. Well-meaning people violate it by insisting that we are a Christian nation, that our religion ought to be privileged over others, that prayers ought to be said in school. It is violated by the undercurrent of hostility toward Islam and Muslims which is just below the surface of much of the public rhetoric one hears on talk shows.

The Founders could have created a Christian republic and chose not to. Instead they created an atmosphere of liberty in which people are free to believe or not believe, free to support religion or ignore it. And to everyone's surprise, it is in that rare atmosphere of liberty that religion has thrived uniquely and consistently.

The philosophic basis for freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, is in the second paragraph of the remarkable document they commissioned Thomas Jefferson to write 234 years ago, a Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the Governed." At the time, those words did not apply to women, nor did they apply to the 700,000 slaves, mostly in the Southern colonies. The nation would struggle to make good on those ideas and ultimately fight a bloody civil war. But Britain's chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, calls the idea that all human beings are equal the most important idea in all of history.

It's in the first chapter of the Bible in the assertion that human beings are created by God and have the image of God in them and that, therefore, human beings are worthy of respect and protection and dignity—every human being.

It is why we go to such lengths to assure that even criminals are treated with fairness and are not tortured. We have recently witnessed an eloquent demonstration of how central and precious that idea is in the painstaking investigation, prosecution, trial, and conviction of a Chicago police officer who violated it. It is why we examine our national conscience when we discover that we have been torturing terror suspects. It is not, as some suggest, because we are weak, wobbly, afraid to be tough, but the exact opposite. We would be strong in commitment to our most precious principles—in this case, the God-given equality and worth of every human being.

The unique thing about this country is that we are held together by our commitment to a set of ideas. We are the United States of America not because we are from the same race, not because we inhabit the same geography, precious as it is to us. You don't hear us talking about the Fatherland or Mother Russia. We are bound together by those ideas and ideals:

The dignity and worth of very human being
The liberty that is the unalienable right of every human being

And what keeps us together is a covenant to live those ideals. It is something like love. That's what patriotism is, a love for country. William Sloane Coffin, who loved this country enough to fight for it and to criticize it, wrote, "There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad patriots are uncertain lovers and the loveless critics of their country, a reflection of God's lovers quarrel with the world" (*A Passion for the Possible*, p. 10). Don't say "My country, right or wrong," Coffin used to quip. "That's like saying my grandmother, drunk or sober. It doesn't get you anywhere." Love for this country of ours is not an exclusive, intolerant love but an expansive love, a love that Colin Powell was talking about when he remembered his parents arriving at Ellis Island in 1923 from Jamaica, "an America with a big, charitable, open heart that reaches out to people in need around the world."

It is big-hearted love that will sacrifice and even lay life down for the nation and its highest principles. Whatever your feelings about our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we are blessed by the devotion of the young men and women who serve and are wounded and die there. I think a lot about that

love, particularly today as we ponder the birth of our nation. Thanks be to God for them.

I happened on a letter recently written by a young Yale University student to his father, dated April 30, 1942. The nation had been at war for five months. The young man had made a difficult decision to leave the comfort and security of Yale and join up and become an aviation cadet. He knew his parents would be disappointed, so he sat down to write to his father and poured out his heart.

> I know how much you and Mother have wanted me to get a college education, but after thinking it over, I have decided that I can't remain in school at Yale. . . . There is a war going on; there is a job to be done, today. . . . We all must do our part in this great effort, and my part, as I see it, is to serve in the Air Corp <u>now</u>.
>
> I hope this decision of mine won't make you feel any different towards me. I hope I still have the blessings of both you and Mother—without your best wishes I will be lost. . . . I hope that you both are behind me wholeheartedly. I won't be able to do my best if I know that you are disappointed in my decision. Please write me soon. All my love, Your devoted son.

Captain Carleton Cleveland flew thirty-five missions over France and Germany as a navigator on a B17. He was twenty years old when he enlisted. His thoughtful, modest letter is our nation at its best. His uncomplicated responsibility for the common good, his simple, but profound willingness to put his life on the line is our nation at its best—and what binds us together.

With similar modesty and integrity and love George Washington's closing words to his fellow citizens anticipate "the benign influence of good laws under a free Government." He left public service and returned to Mount Vernon, he said, with "a fervent love" for his fellow citizens, "hoping for their continued kindness to an old and affectionate friend."

> My country 'tis of the thee,
> Sweet land of liberty
> of thee I sing.

Amen.